



A study in outward facing assessment in Further Education teacher training programmes in Ireland

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SOFA: A Study In Outward Facing Assessment In Further Education Teacher Training Programmes In Ireland

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Author(s): Anne Graham Cagney (presenting)
Tracy Irwin
Anne O'Mahony
Carol Yelverton-Halpin

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Paper Session

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Chair: Rachel Shanks

Contribution

This study is about how higher education institutions in Ireland provide a teacher education framework for academic staff in colleges of further education (and other post-14 education teaching/training). Learning experiences from advanced teaching skills, critical reflection and the application of theory into practice are essential for those who wish to continue working within this diverse sector. SOFA builds on two previous collaborative research projects undertaken at Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) and by WIT with the General Teaching Council of Northern Ireland (GTCNI).

1) Teacher Education Qualification (TEQ) research project on enhancing teaching-learning environments (TLEs) in undergraduate and post-graduate Further Education (FE) teacher education qualification programmes, and

2) SAFETTI Study (funded by SCoTENS in partnership with GTCNI) which explored key issues in professional development and identity of graduate FE teachers North and South (<https://www.safettistudy.com>)

Results from both these studies recommended an exploration of the teaching practice observation and assessment process as a potential area for enhancing the student learning experience as they undertake and acquire their teaching qualifications.

The **aim** of SOFA is to explore how to create a model of outward-facing assessments for the observation and assessment of Further Education teaching practice. Other outcomes include a contribution to knowledge of how to create a flexible framework for curriculum design, and how to link professional practice and connected learning opportunities.

Key objectives of the study are:

- To develop a model of outward-facing assessment for teaching practice observation in FE TEQ programmes in Ireland: North and South
- To explore how to enhance professional education through research and enquiry-based activities, that link professional practice and connected learning opportunities, and
- To provide an opportunity to evaluate the research process and to contribute to knowledge on how to create a flexible framework for curriculum design.

Research questions that guided the study included:

- What are your experiences of Teaching Practice (TP) and TP Assessment?
- What decisions did you make in your TP Assessment and how did you select these?
- What factors of assessment could/would facilitate your TP Observational experience?
- How can TP practitioners effectively engage in their own assessment?
- Did you have voice and choice in your assessment?

Theoretical frameworks that inform this study include:-

i) The Connected Curriculum(Pinar, 2012; Fung, 2015). Enhancing education through research and enquiry-based activities creates links with professional practice and opportunities for connected learning (Fung, 2015). By integrating research and education it becomes possible to support an inspirational student experience (UCL, 2016). The connected curriculum design underpins this research project. It encourages active and research based learning, professional development through dialogue, inter-disciplinarity, students as partners, a holistic approach to learning, teaching-led research and assessments as public engagement (Pinar, 2012). There are three aspects to the feedback triangle: 1) content of feedback; 2) organisation and

management of feedback; and 3) social and interpersonal negotiation of feedback.

ii) The 'inner' Teaching-Learning Environment (Entwistle, 2003; Entwistle & McCune, 2009). Constructivist research funded by the UK government into enhancing teaching-learning environments (TLEs) suggests that students perceptions of the TLE are strongly determined by 'a set of overlapping contexts that comprise of four elements: course contexts; teaching and assessing content; staff-student relationships; and aspects of the students and student culture within a particular programme (Entwistle, 2003; Entwistle & McCune, 2009). The 'inner' TLE map acts as an organising framework when considering how to encourage students to engage more deeply with the subject matter and achieve a high quality of learning through the creation of transformative learning spaces (Graham Cagney, 2011).

Method

SOFA was the second project funded by SCoTENS and helped to build a clearer picture of the experiences of FE teacher professional development in Ireland. Project conceptualisation and final design, ethical approval (Ulster University and Waterford Institute of Technology), selection of participants (North and South), information and agreement on participation (consent), and partner publication agreements were successfully negotiated and completed within a tight timeframe. The study adopted a qualitative inquiry approach, used a mixed method design and purposive sampling (deMarrais, 2004; Roulston, 2010). All participants had completed a graduate or post-graduate FE teacher qualification and were teaching in FE colleges in Northern Ireland (North) or the Republic of Ireland (South). Four workshops were conducted at different locations (North and South), with a total of twenty-eight participants overall. Participants discussed their experiences of teaching practice observation and assessment. Workshops were facilitated by two members of the research team, one from the North and one from the South; a lead facilitator who would co-ordinate and management the session and an observer who would take notes and support the facilitation. The workshop design led to interactive and engaged discussion in an open format with participants. Artifacts gathered during the workshops included audio clips, flipchart notes, post-its and interviewer notes. Transcription of each workshop audio recordings was sent to participants who attended that particular workshop. They were encouraged to review the transcript and our interpretation of the workshop and to contribute further if they wished. The Principal Investigator conducted follow-up semi-structured interviews with a cross-section of six participants. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study and triangulate the interviews, supporting documentary evidence that provided further insights was collected as the participant felt comfortable. Individuals were also asked to review their transcript and our interpretation of the interview and engage in a follow-up interview if deeper inquiry was beneficial as a part of our member checking process. Digital recordings were fully transcribed. Consistent with qualitative methodology, the data was analysed by the researchers with respect to the research questions using a mix of inductive coding and the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and the modified Inductive Framework Approach (Smith & Firth, 2011). Analysis of themes within each category produced the preliminary findings that follow. Final phase coding and analysis of the data set is underway and will be completed by April 2018.

Expected Outcomes

Initial findings on 'inner' teaching-learning environment identify how FE teachers experience teaching practice observation and assessment and what learning spaces are needed to support their 'readiness for change'. Teaching and Assessment: Similar to Yang and Carless (2013) participants reported differences of experience of feedback. Clarity on what it meant; clear criteria for the organisation and management of feedback, and agreed guidelines for teaching practice observation were important. With the exception of a few comments on the 'approachability' of teaching staff 'social and interpersonal negotiation of feedback will have to be explored further. 'same observer for continuity and relationships'; observation should be 'relevant and useful for day-to-day teaching' were recurring themes. Other students were more oriented toward peer assessment and feedback and less formal observation. One individual did highlight that in their view some students were 'playing to the observer'. This is an interesting observation and one pursued later in the study during the one-to-one interviews. Additional themes included 1) Staff-student relationships: personal support received from faculty and/or support they had or had not received from their own colleges. 2) Course design and organisation was a strong element: timetables, dates, planning and scheduling all seemed to arise as issues of one kind or another. Also suggested shortening of programme length. Key suggestions were for more observations, reflective accounts, ad hoc observations and feedback from previous selected areas to work on e.g. peer learning. There are differences of experience across programmes related to assessment. For many students written assignments were manageable on the whole for the initial phases of their programme but became too much in the final year when they were loaded on top of the teaching practice observation experiences.

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Author Information

Anne Graham Cagney (presenting)

Waterford Institute of Technology

Education

Waterford

Anne Graham Cagney (presenting)

Waterford Institute of Technology

Education

Waterford

Tracy Irwin

Ulster University, Northern Ireland

Anne O'Mahony

Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland

Carol Yelverton-Halpin

Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland

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EERA Office

European Educational Research Association

Feurigstr. 22

10827 Berlin, Germany

Telephone: +49 (0)30 857 36220

Telefax: +49 (0)30 377 19572

office@eera.eu